

From Campaign-Style Enforcement to Feedback-Based Governance: Regulating Shadow Education under China's Double Reduction Policy

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Abstract: China's "Double Reduction" policy provides a useful case for examining how governments regulate shadow education under conditions of high-stakes educational competition. Existing studies have documented its short-term effects on tutoring participation, household expenditure, and after-school services, but less attention has been paid to why regulatory enforcement must be linked to public provision and institutional feedback. Drawing on policy document analysis and recent Chinese scholarship on shadow education governance, policy implementation, after-school services, teacher workload, and differentiated policy effects, this article develops a mechanism-based account of the policy. It argues that the Double Reduction policy reframes homework and tutoring burdens from private family choices into public governance problems. Its effectiveness depends not only on restricting tutoring institutions, but also on identifying disguised tutoring practices, strengthening school-based provision, supporting teachers, and developing group-specific evaluation mechanisms. The article contributes to shadow education governance by showing that regulation, provision, and feedback must operate together in competitive education systems.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy, Shadow Education, Private Tutoring, Policy Implementation, Policy Instruments, Feedback-Based Governance.

1. Introduction

Recent Chinese studies show that off-campus tutoring is not merely an individual family choice, but a form of supplementary education shaped by family educational investment, institutional regulation, and public governance concerns [1]–[3].

China's Double Reduction policy, issued in July 2021, represents one of the most forceful recent attempts to regulate shadow education. The policy aims to reduce homework burden and off-campus tutoring burden among students in compulsory education. Its deeper significance, however, lies not only in burden reduction. It seeks to reconfigure the boundaries among public schooling, family investment, market provision, and state regulation. Recent Chinese research argues that the Double Reduction policy marks a governance shift from tolerating the expansion of marketized tutoring toward strengthening public regulation and reconstructing school-based educational supply [4].

This article asks why shadow education cannot be governed through institutional suppression alone. In high-stakes education systems, market restriction is insufficient because family anxiety, school competition, and uneven public provision sustain tutoring demand. It argues that sustainable governance requires a shift from campaign-style enforcement to feedback-based governance, in which regulation, provision, and feedback operate together.

2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

2.1. Shadow Education as a Governance Problem

Shadow education exists because formal schooling is closely tied to competition, ranking, and selection. Families

use tutoring to secure advantage or reduce perceived risk. Recent Chinese studies further show that off-campus tutoring is institutionally connected with family educational investment and regulatory arrangements rather than being a purely private market choice [1], [2]. These studies move the issue beyond parental choice and locate tutoring within the broader structure of schooling and public governance.

Before the Double Reduction policy, private tutoring was embedded in household educational strategies: better-resourced families could purchase additional instruction, while lower-income families often felt compelled to compete. This makes tutoring a governance issue rather than a neutral service market. After the policy, some academic-subject tutoring declined, but demand persisted and participation varied by family background and educational expectation [5]; county-level research finds that markets may move underground under greater regulatory pressure [6].

2.2. Policy Instruments and Implementation Tensions

The design of the Double Reduction policy can be understood as an instrument mix rather than a single regulatory action. Recent Chinese studies show that the policy combines administrative regulation, school-based supply, homework reform, after-school services, and evaluation-oriented adjustment [7]. The Double Reduction policy combines several of these tools. It uses mandates and penalties to restrict tutoring institutions. It also relies on capacity-building through school-based after-school services, homework reform, and teaching improvement.

However, implementation is not a mechanical process. Recent Chinese studies identify structural implementation difficulties in the Double Reduction policy, including uneven school capacity, parental expectations, local coordination problems, and policy execution barriers [8], [9]. Other

research further shows that family-school cooperation affects students' developmental outcomes under the policy. In the Double Reduction case, teachers, schools, local regulators, families, and market actors all reinterpret the policy in practice, making cross-sector coordination and stakeholder interaction central to policy effectiveness [10].

Based on these insights, this article adopts the framework of “problem construction-instrument configuration-implementation tension-feedback-based adaptation.” Problem construction explains how homework and tutoring burdens become public problems. Instrument configuration explains how regulatory tools and school-based provision are combined. Implementation tension explains why visible policy effects may produce hidden adaptations. Feedback-based adaptation explains how the policy can move from temporary rectification toward durable governance.

3. Research Design

This qualitative policy analysis does not attempt independent econometric identification. It draws on national policy documents and related governance practices issued after 2021, and recent peer-reviewed Chinese scholarship, especially 2024–2025 research on tutoring participation, parental anxiety, teacher workload, school-based services, policy implementation, stakeholder coordination, and differentiated policy effects.

The analysis identifies how tutoring and homework burdens are framed as public problems, classifies regulatory and provision-oriented tools, examines tensions among key actors, and derives a feedback-based governance model linking behavioral identification, school capacity building, teacher support, and group-specific evaluation.

4. Mechanism Analysis

4.1. From Family Choice to Public Governance

The Double Reduction policy addresses homework and tutoring burdens within a broader educational ecology. Before its introduction, tutoring was a defensive family choice to prevent children from falling behind; collectively, such choices escalated costs, compressed students' discretionary time, and weakened public schooling's coordinating and compensatory function.

Tutoring cannot therefore be treated solely as private consumption. Linked to admission competition, it redistributes educational opportunity: families with stronger economic and cultural resources can more easily sustain advantage. After the Double Reduction policy, visible tutoring expenditure may decline while better-resourced families seek private or concealed support [11]. Anxiety relief is also uneven: after-school services can reduce anxiety depending on trust in schools and service quality [12], and nationwide evidence shows regional and family-group differences [13].

Public opinion also helps explain why tutoring entered the policy agenda. Online public concern after the policy has not been limited to tutoring institutions. It has extended to teacher workload, after-school services, student development, and family pressure [14]. The policy therefore does not simply regulate an industry. It reconstructs the relationship among school education, household strategy, tutoring markets, and state responsibility.

4.2. Regulation and Provision as a Combined Instrument Mix

The Double Reduction policy relies on two linked instruments. The first is stringent regulation of private tutoring providers through approval control, fee regulation, advertising restrictions, capital constraints, time limits, and administrative penalties. Household survey data show that academic-subject tutoring participation and related expenditure declined after the policy [15], [16], while a three-year review finds measurable effects but a need for further optimization [17].

The second is school-based public provision. Because competition and uneven school capacity generate tutoring demand, regulation alone cannot resolve the problem; families will seek substitutes when they distrust public schooling. The policy therefore expands after-school services, promotes homework reform, and emphasizes classroom quality. Homework governance must move beyond time control to learning diagnosis, feedback, and task design [18], while workload reduction must be linked to learning effectiveness [19]. After-school services also require attention to curriculum, staffing, funding, safety, and evaluation [20].

The key point is that regulation and provision must operate together. Regulation compresses excessive market-based tutoring. Provision determines whether families can return to school-based education with confidence. If the two instruments are not aligned, the policy may reduce the number of tutoring institutions without reducing competition, anxiety, or hidden educational investment.

4.3. Implementation Tensions and Hidden Adaptation

The first tension is disguised tutoring. As enforcement became routinized, activities reappeared as private or in-home tutoring, childcare, study camps, consultation, online small-group classes, or non-academic enrichment. The central question is therefore not formal registration, but whether a service substantively provides academic instruction for test-score improvement or school progression [21].

This creates a regulatory dilemma. If enforcement is too weak, tutoring becomes hidden. If enforcement is too broad, normal family education, public-interest childcare, and compliant non-academic learning may be harmed. County-level studies therefore recommend classified regulation, clearer evidentiary standards, improved information discovery, and interdepartmental coordination [6]. Research on policy execution also suggests that implementation obstruction should be addressed through clearer responsibility allocation and more coordinated governance mechanisms [10].

The second tension concerns teachers. Schools must improve teaching, redesign homework, provide after-school services, and communicate with parents under pressure from policy requirements, school assessment, and parental expectations [10]. These tasks expand teachers' task structure [22]. Without workload accounting, compensation, flexible scheduling, and professional support, reducing students' visible burden may increase teachers' invisible burden.

The third tension is differentiated policy effects. Administrative regulation, market adaptation, and family-level private strategies jointly shape outcomes [23]. Although tutoring participation and spending fell, effects differ across family groups [16]. The reduction of academic-subject

tutoring institutions also increased students' time at school [24], but this does not ensure quality: if after-school services remain supervision, self-study, or repeated exercises, schools merely absorb time released by the tutoring market.

5. Discussion

5.1. From Institutional Suppression to Behavioral Governance

The Double Reduction case shows that shadow education governance cannot stop at institutional suppression. In competitive education systems, tutoring markets adapt quickly. Once visible institutions are restricted, tutoring may become smaller, more private, more expensive, and harder to detect. Governance must therefore shift from counting institutions to identifying substantive behaviors.

Behavioral governance should focus on the substance of the service: whether it targets students in compulsory education, provides academic-subject instruction, involves continuous payment, and serves test-score improvement or school progression. This approach avoids two errors. It prevents disguised tutoring from escaping regulation. It also prevents normal family education and legitimate non-academic learning from being treated as illegal.

5.2. Public Provision as the Condition for Durable Regulation

Regulation becomes sustainable only when schools can provide credible public alternatives. This is the main theoretical lesson of the Chinese case. Shadow education is not simply a market problem. It is also a signal that families doubt whether formal schooling can satisfy academic, developmental, or childcare needs.

School capacity building therefore matters. Homework reform needs collective design, feedback, and diagnostic value. After-school services need differentiated layers, including basic care, enrichment activities, and individualized support. STEAM and interdisciplinary activities may help prevent after-school services from becoming limited to supervision or repeated remediation [25]. Teachers also need institutional support. If teachers are treated as unlimited implementation resources, the policy will weaken its own foundation.

5.3. Feedback-based Governance and Group-specific Evaluation

Average indicators are not enough. A decline in the number of tutoring institutions does not show whether tutoring has moved underground. A higher after-school service participation rate does not prove service quality. A fall in household expenditure may conceal rising inequality if affluent families purchase more private forms of support.

Feedback-based governance requires group-specific evaluation. Indicators should include homework time, sleep, physical activity, psychological condition, household expenditure, participation in academic and non-academic training, reports and complaints concerning disguised tutoring, teachers' working hours, teacher satisfaction, and urban-rural differences in school provision. Policy evaluation must distinguish educational stages, regions, school types, and family socioeconomic status. Studies on stratified response mechanisms show that administrative regulation, market adaptation, and family-level private strategies jointly shape policy outcomes [23]. Educational evaluation reform is

also necessary. If schools, teachers, and families remain governed by score-based competition, burden reduction will remain unstable [26].

6. Conclusion

This article has examined China's Double Reduction policy as a case of shadow education governance. The policy does not merely reduce homework and tutoring. It reframes private educational choices as public governance problems and combines market regulation with school-based public provision. Its main challenge lies in implementation: disguised tutoring, teacher workload, uneven service quality, differentiated family strategies, and persistent score-based competition.

Effective governance requires a closed loop of regulation, provision, implementation feedback, and evaluation reform. Campaign-style rectification may deliver short-term results, but durable governance depends on behavioral identification, public educational capacity, teacher support, and group-specific feedback. The Chinese case thus shows that regulating shadow education in high-stakes systems requires public service reconstruction and continuous institutional adaptation, not simply market limits.

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